Specters of the Popular Front

A review of Ash Sarkar's *Minority Rule*

Dan Davison

Ash Sarkar, *Minority Rule: Adventures in the Culture War* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025).

IN *MINORITY RULE:* *Adventures in the Culture War*, British Left commentator Ash Sarkar seeks to expose how "minority elites" use the culture wars to stoke fear and panic in the media landscape. In particular, they fuel an irrational fear that minority populations, such as immigrants and trans people, are attempting to overturn and oppress majority populations — to impose "Minority Rule." Sarkar argues that, by cultivating such anxieties, these elites strategically misdirect blame for the inequalities and pathologies in society and sustain their own positions of power. In her words, "the paranoid fantasy of Minority Rule upholds a *real* minority rule, by keeping us divided and competing against one another for attention" (20).

Over the course of her analysis, Sarkar mounts an extended criticism of contemporary identity politics on the Left. She contends that, through the kind of politics of victimhood and grievance it adopted, "the left unwittingly forged the political weapons being used against it by our political opponents" (21). Sarkar identifies three major preoccupations that have driven what she calls the "liberal turn" in identity politics and enabled the forces of reaction to appropriate and weaponize elements of identity politics in the form of grievance politics: "the notion of *irreducible difference* between identity groups, the idea that identity groups have *competing interests*, and that *lived experience is a form of unassailable political authority*" (32).

The timing of Sarkar's book is somewhat puzzling. I don't mean that in the sense that she has brought out a book criticizing contemporary identity politics right when the Trump Administration is waging a "war on woke." That timing — which probably stems from most of the book being written before the 2024 U.S. Presidential election, but not published until a few months afterwards — is why many have characterized *Minority Rule*'s publication along the lines of "big-name Lefty comes out against 'woke' politics after years of peddling it!" Rather, what I find puzzling about the book's timing is how it seems a good few years behind the broader debate on class and identity politics. From around 2017 to 2022, multiple books on this topic came out and became common points of reference on the self-identified Left, often in response to criticisms of Bernie Sanders in the U.S. and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK.[1] While I appreciate that many factors can delay a book's release, it's still hard to shake the feeling that Sarkar has arrived somewhat late to the party.

In this review, I am not especially concerned with how I found Sarkar's book in terms of reading experience.[2] Rather, I want to examine the book as an attempt to grapple with symptoms of a particular moment in the Millennial Left's trajectory *which is itself a symptom of that moment*. Sarkar tries to provide a critical account of how the liberation politics of the 1960s–70s became the identity politics of the 1980s–90s, and how her and my generation, the Millennials, picked up that identity politics. She hopes that providing this account will help the Left to shake off its ideological encumbrances and thereby fight oppression and exploitation more effectively. How Sarkar goes about this ends up continuing the Millennial Left's curious love affair with the New Left. That is, Sarkar repeats the Millennial Left's attempt to transcend the dark years of reaction that marked the Gen X era of the 80s–90s by reconnecting with the New Left of the 60s–70s. This effort by the Millennial Left ultimately failed to interrogate and learn from the New Left's own errors and blind spots, including those caused by what the New Left inherited in turn from the Old Left.[3]

One of Sarkar's central claims is that identity politics had genuinely radical origins, only to be captured or co-opted for conservative ends over the following decades. In her words, "As identity politics became untethered from Marxist thinking and more bound up in liberal individualism it became less concerned with transforming society, and more focused on being represented in it" (44). To support her claim, Sarkar discusses the famous black lesbian feminist group the Combahee River Collective (CRC) (29–30, 42). The CRC are often credited with articulating an early iteration of what Kimberlé Crenshaw would later term "intersectionality." They saw themselves as socialists and stressed the need to bring down capitalism and imperialism, but warned against thinking of the working class as "merely raceless, sexless workers." In contrast to contemporary formulations, the CRC's formulation of identity politics was "unambiguously anti-capitalist, collective, and international in scope" (31).

Another major example Sarkar discusses is the Black Panthers' Rainbow Coalition (37–38). Formed in 1969 by Fred Hampton, the Rainbow Coalition brought together various community-based organizations in Chicago to confront issues like housing and police brutality. This included the Puerto Rican Young Lords and the Southern white Young Patriots. Sarkar notes that the Panthers were more than happy for Vietnamese anti-war organizations and white radicals to name themselves the "Yellow Panthers" and "White Panthers" respectively. She highlights this attitude to sharing names and political slogans to make a pointed contrast with contemporary identity politics, whose "logic of competing interests can create an antagonism and ill-feeling between groups who could otherwise find common cause in their experiences of discrimination and violence" (37 [emphasis removed]).

Minority Rule's basic narrative closely follows such previous books on identity politics as Asad Haider's *Mistaken Identity* (2018) and Olúfẁ mi O. Táíwò's *Elite Capture* (2022), with Sarkar making multiple direct references to the latter. Much like those previous works' authors, Sarkar sees a need in the present to reacquaint ourselves with earlier, more radical formulations. For example, bemoaning how there has been "a retreat from thinking about the interconnectedness of racism, sexism, the exploitation of labour, ableism and homophobia beyond how they intersect at the level of the individual," she highlights the importance of what the CRC termed "simultaneity" (36–37, 50). This is the idea that, as racism, sexism, etc., operate and are experienced simultaneously, they must be fought simultaneously. Without an emphasis on simultaneity, Sarkar argues, people easily slide into "a feeling of paralysis," because they "are held responsible for what goes on in 'their' community, and told that good allyship means tackling oppressive behaviors amongst those who share identity characteristics with you" (37).

In holding up these examples from the New Left as providing a lost, "truer" form of identity politics that still holds lessons directly applicable to the present-day Left, Sarkar fails to make any serious examination of their politics. In particular, she fails to make any critical consideration of the extent to which these New Left examples were themselves shaped by ideas inherited from the Old Left's Popular Front turn in the 1930s, including via Maoism.

As Mike Macnair observes, the oft-cited 1977 CRC "Statement"[4] brings together ideas about the combined effect of multiple oppressions that were widespread on the 70s Left and "were linked to 'soft Maoist' interpretations of the 'labour aristocracy' theory, the idea that the bulk of the actual organised working class movement was corrupted by privileges."[5] In contrast to Sarkar's affirmative treatment of the "Statement" and its authors, Macnair points to how, in the "Statement" and its subsequent promotion, one can see several characteristic elements of contemporary identity politics. These include the vulgarization of Marxism to find it in need of "extension" (with CRC author Beverly Smith claiming that "if someone's a socialist, it's only about economics"), the emphasis on single-issue campaign coalitions, and the demands for organized black women to have leadership and veto within these coalitions.[6]

This brings us to the legacy of the 30s Popular Front. Under this policy, the Stalinized Third International directed each Communist Party to build a cross-class alliance against fascism (or, in the colonized world, against colonialism) within its respective country.[7] Macnair argues that the Popular Front gave rise to the now-widespread notion of a "trinity" of class, gender, and race. This is because the Popular Front led the Communists to treat the "official" black community and women's movement leaders as legitimate representatives of their specific group interests that were separate from the class interests of the working class.[8] As Pamela Nogales puts it, this meant seeing labor as "one interest group among the many," "represented by the Communist Party affiliated unions allied with the Democrats" in the U.S.[9] Through the Popular Front, "the communists turned socialism into the social management of labor discontents through union representatives, for whom they fought to get a seat at the table."[10] In other words, there is a distant but straight line between the Popular Front of the 30s and the politics of identity-group representation and "allyship" that Sarkar associates with present-day identity politics.[11] Indeed, one could point to 30s Stalinism as one of the main origin points of the largely cultural or identitarian understanding of class that Sarkar criticizes (138–41). After all, socialist realism, the artistic and literary style adopted as official Communist doctrine in 1934, only makes sense if one conceives of the working class in terms

Issue 180 | October 2025

Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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1 Specters of the Popular Front
A review of Ash Sarkar's *Minority Rule*
Dan Davison

3 The American Constitution and the Left
Erin Hagood, Daniel Lazare, and Caleb Maupin

Social relations and ideology
An anti-critique
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www:

The Platypus Review
Issue 180 | October 2025

180

The American Constitution and the Left

Erin Hagood, Daniel Lazare, and Caleb Maupin

On May 2, 2023, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a panel on the American Constitution and the Left at New York University. The panelists were Erin Hagood (Platypus), Daniel Lazare (writer at the Weekly Worker,[1] *author of* The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution is Paralysing Democracy*), and Caleb Maupin (Center for Political Innovation). The panel was moderated by Platypus member Oliver Chasan. An edited transcript follows.*[2]

Opening remarks

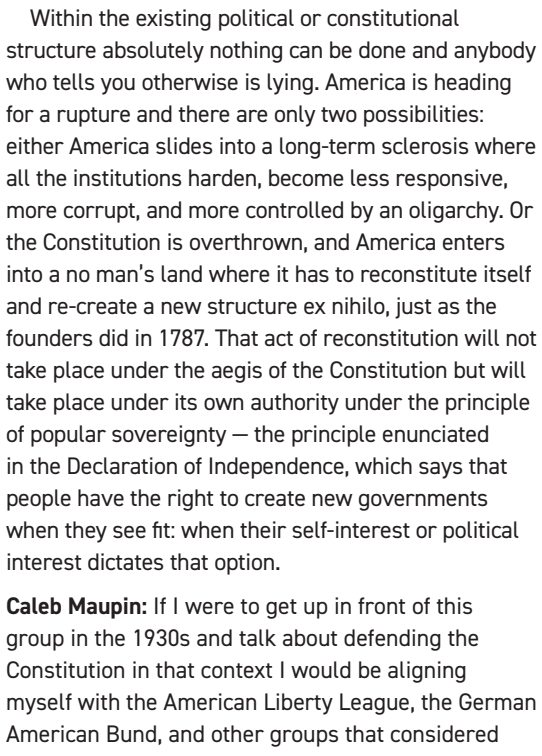
Daniel Lazare: In 1996 I published a book called *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution is Paralysing Democracy*. It tried to grapple with the Constitution as a whole, not any specific clause or amendment but the logic of the entire document. I argue that the Constitution is a disaster in the making because it is the sole source of political authority in the United States. Everything in our life is determined by the Constitution, directly or indirectly.

The problem with the Constitution is that it's logically incoherent. It opens with a preamble that advances a sweeping definition of popular sovereignty in which "we the people" can ordain new constitutions as we see fit in order to improve our society and, implicitly, "we the people" can toss out old constitutions as well, out of the same drive or desire. But the rest of the document is essentially at war with popular sovereignty. It tries to constrain it, limit it, and nip it in the bud. The best example is Article 5 — the amendment clause. To pass a new amendment you must have the approval of two thirds of each house plus three fourths of the states. Which means that 13 states can veto any structural change whatsoever. 13 states can be as little as 4.4% of the U.S. population. The U.S. has an 18th-century Constitution which is more and more constrictive as time goes on and therefore the society grows more and more conservative. The U.S. finds itself in the same boat as the Russian or Chinese Empire, two vast structures that grew rigid as the centuries wore on until finally they completely collapsed.

What passes for politics in Washington is a complete joke. Checks and balances have totally broken down. There is warfare on Capitol Hill and on the government by character assassination. There is no policy-making to speak of. In the U.S., since I wrote my book in 96, we've seen the impeachment of Bill Clinton, the stolen election in December 2000, 9/11, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which were carried out by tiny cabals in the White House with no public oversight or debate. Then we saw another stolen election, because the electoral college was able to override the popular vote in 2016, and an attempted coup d'état in 2021. Since then we've seen nothing but endless warfare. We live in a minority dictatorship with a Senate, which, for example, gives the same vote to Wyoming that it does to California, even though the population differential between the two is nearly 70-to-1. The Electoral College leans heavily on white, rural states. The Supreme Court, which is chosen by a President chosen by the Electoral College jointly with the Senate, is now dominated by a 6–3 ultra-conservative majority which is unbreakable for at least a decade. We're in the grips of a Right-wing-majority dictatorship.

Within the existing political or constitutional structure absolutely nothing can be done and anybody who tells you otherwise is lying. America is heading for a rupture and there are only two possibilities: either America slides into a long-term sclerosis where all the institutions harden, become less responsive, more corrupt, and more controlled by an oligarchy. Or the Constitution is overthrown, and America enters into a no man's land where it has to reconstitute itself and re-create a new structure ex nihilo, just as the founders did in 1787. That act of reconstitution will not take place under the aegis of the Constitution but will take place under its own authority under the principle of popular sovereignty — the principle enunciated in the Declaration of Independence, which says that people have the right to create new governments when they see fit: when their self-interest or political interest dictates that option.

Caleb Maupin: If I were to get up in front of this group in the 1930s and talk about defending the Constitution in that context I would be aligning myself with the American Liberty League, the German American Bund, and other groups that considered Franklin Delano Roosevelt a brutal dictator. I would be arguing that Roosevelt was a communist who was threatening our constitutional freedoms and I would be aligning myself with the fascists against the communists. However, in the early 1950s, if I were to defend the Constitution, I would be opposing McCarthyism and supporting freedom of speech. I would be opposing the far-Right wing that was trying to outlaw the Communist Party. Let's not forget that Communists started the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Let's not forget that in the 50s and 60s the Left tried to expand constitutional liberties and freedoms. During the Bush years, the Left defended constitutional freedoms. I would argue that it is correct now to defend the Constitution.



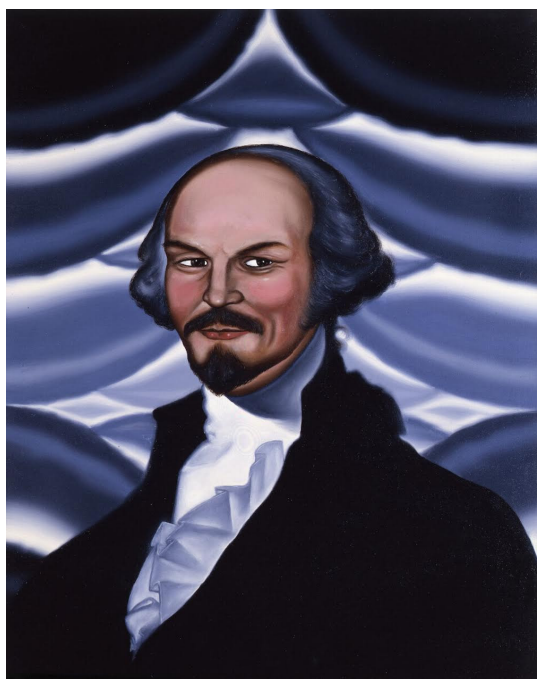
Earl Browder, General Secretary of the Communist Party USA (1939)

Why is defense of the Constitution necessary now? The Uhuru movement, a group of black Marxist socialists, have just been indicted by the federal government. They're facing 10 years in prison on grounds that they've "spread Russian propaganda." Congress is currently discussing the Restrict Act which would enable the executive branch of the U.S. government to violate an individual's civil liberties by declaring him a foreign asset or a foreign agent. Julian Assange is rotting away in a British prison facing extradition to the U.S. to be prosecuted under the Espionage Act. The social media outlet formerly known as Twitter was coordinating with U.S. security agencies, the FBI, and others to silence certain political perspectives. Members of Congress have threatened to jail journalist Matt Taibbi for testifying about this fact.

There is a movement in this country that uses McCarthyism to defend Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and the current administration. It mirrors the Bush administration during the aftermath of 9/11 and the War on Terror. It argues that certain people are so bad that constitutional liberties and the Constitution itself need to be put on hold so that they can be silenced. The 1619 Project goes as far as to argue that the entire cause of the American Revolution was racism and slavery, and so nullification of the Constitution is justified. January 6 is also being used to justify the destruction of constitutional liberties.

As part of the Center for Political Innovation, I sponsored the Rage Against the War Machine protests that happened in Washington, DC this February. At those demonstrations Jimmy Dore, the Libertarian Party, the Mises Party, Tulsi Gabbard, and former Fox News hosts protested the police state at home and the coming world war against China and Russia abroad.

I would argue that in our time we're seeing a long-term crisis of overproduction. As Marx observed when writing about France in 1851, when you have a long-term capitalist crisis a liberal capitalist society will collapse into some form of illiberalism; this is called Bonapartism. It's the result of a capitalist crisis and an attempt to manage the crisis and stabilize capitalism. There is a Bonapartist move by some of the richest forces in the U.S., who argue that to reset the capitalist economy we need to dramatically reduce consumption and crush oppositional countries like Russia, China, Venezuela, and Iran. The lower levels of capital, however, resist these forces for their own selfish reasons. This creates the possibility of a new popular front to be formed against degrowth, the low-wage police state, and the danger of World War III.



Roger Brown, "A Less Menacing and More Benign Portrait of Lenin (After Gilbert Stuart)" (1987)

We should defend the Constitution so that we can change it. I would like to see the "economic bill of rights" that Roosevelt spoke about. Eventually there should probably be a new constitution. It is necessary now for us to defend the U.S. Constitution the same way Lenin called for defending the British Labour Party: "in the same way a rope supports a hanged man."

Erin Hagood: The Constitution is an objectification of the Revolution itself. The ongoing crisis of the bourgeois revolution is a crisis of the Constitution.

The American Revolution was organized in the complex public sphere created by the emerging bourgeois society. American opposition to the Stamp Act, which put a special tax on printed material, and the organization of the Revolution through "Committees of Correspondence" are indicative of this. From freedom of speech to the right to bear arms to the prohibition on quartering soldiers, the Bill of Rights is suffused with the experience of the American Revolution itself.

But it is not just the Bill of Rights! Although the Left in the 20th century has often bemoaned the separation of powers in the Constitution as the Constitution of the "slaveholders and aristocrats" (c.f. Earl Browder), we can find the origin of the three branches of government and separation of powers in the experience of the American Revolution. The Virginia Constitution of 1776, adopted alongside the Declaration of Independence, declared dissolution of ties with Britain and denounced the "detestable and insupportable tyranny" of King George III. Checks and balances, far from being a tool against the people, were envisioned as a safeguard for the people, so that the government could not violate the freedom of society.

F. Graham Cootes, "Portrait of Woodrow Wilson" (1936)

The first test of this nation conceived in liberty was the expansion of the Revolution to Europe during the Great French Revolution of 1789. As in Britain, support for the Revolution was suppressed in the U.S. The Alien and Sedition Acts attempted to roll back the First Amendment. They represented a break with the course of the Revolution which was restored by Jefferson's Revolution of 1800. His restoration of the Constitution (not to mention his monetary support of Napoleon) bolstered the tide of the bourgeois revolution.

Beginning with the Civil War, the next event of world historical importance to emerge from the New Continent, the crisis of the Constitution would coincide with the crisis of capitalism. On the occasion of Lincoln's reelection, Marx wrote to the embattled President:

> When an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders dared to inscribe, for the first time in the annals of the world, "slavery" on the banner of Armed Revolt, when on the very spots where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first Declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth century; when on those very spots counterrevolution, with systematic thoroughness, gloried in rescinding "the ideas entertained at the time of the formation of the old constitution", and maintained slavery to be "a beneficent institution", indeed, the old solution of the great problem of "the relation of capital to labor", and cynically proclaimed property in man "the cornerstone of the new edifice" — then the working classes of Europe understood at once, even before the fanatic partisanship of the upper classes for the Confederate gentry had given its dismal warning, that the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy crusade of property against labor, and that for the men of labor, with their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic.[3]

Marx saw that the Confederacy, in its opposition to the Constitution and the Revolution of 1776, represented a conservative solution to the crisis of society — a repetition and intensification of the problems posed by the 1848 Revolution and the coup of Louis Bonaparte.

In 1891, Woodrow Wilson wrote that "the functions of government are in a very real sense independent of legislation, and even constitutions."[4] He complained in 1913 as President, "The Constitution was founded on the law of gravitation. The government was to exist and move by virtue of the efficacy of 'checks and balances.' The trouble with the theory is that government is not a machine, but a living thing. No living thing can have its organs offset against each other, as checks, and live."[5] The Constitution was, for Wilson, as later for FDR, an obstacle to progressive capitalism, and therefore an obstacle to his solution to WWI and the international revolutionary crisis it occasioned. The language of "insurrection" inherited from the Civil War was seized upon by progressivism not, as in the 1860s, to suppress counterrevolution, but to suppress demands for socialism and criticism of the war. Famously, it was used to imprison Eugene Debs for his criticism of the war and his support of the Bolsheviks.

This suppression of speech made its way to the Supreme Court, which wrung its hands trying to reinterpret the First Amendment to allow the suppression of speech which is a "clear and present danger." The scope of this problem — freedom vs. safety — pierces history. It echoes the language of much of the Left today with regard to free speech and the validity of COVID lockdowns. It also points back to Marx's own criticism of the 1848 French Constitution, which allowed for the rights guaranteed to be suspended in the name of "safety."

Is this proof that the Supreme Court is arrayed against the proletariat? It is not so simple. In one case regarding a pamphlet written by supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution, Justice Holmes wrote that "if proletarian dictatorship is bound to win over the public then it ought to be allowed to govern."[6]

What is democracy? The demand for the state and for the participation of the masses in the state is a violation of the self-understanding of the Revolutionary tradition of the 18th century. The document issued from 1776 sought to protect from politics and the state the revolutionary social body whose emergence it announced on the stage of world history. The demand for democracy, and the repeating demand for universal suffrage, is for Marx a symptom of the crisis of capitalism. This does not mean a symptom of the existence of "classes" or whatever else, but of the epochal problem of the transitional society — it is a category of contradiction. It is a phenomenon of the bourgeois revolution coming into self-contradiction and crisis and ultimately the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat. When Marx called in 1864 for the proletariat to take up the political struggle, he sought to link the Constitutional crisis of the American Civil War to the Revolution that had begun in 1848 so that the unfulfilled bourgeois revolution may attain proletarian leadership.

Socialism is not opposed to liberalism but seeks to take up the desiderata of liberalism in its crisis. The proletarian revolution is not made against the bourgeois revolution, but rather works through the unfinished tasks of that revolution in its hour of need. Marxism as the highest critic of socialism sought to clarify the world historical task of human freedom.

Responses

Daniel Lazare: The American Revolution was fought in defense of existing liberties. The Civil War is a different affair, much closer in spirit to the Jacobin revolution. The American Revolution is almost antithetical to the French Revolution: the last expression of the *ancien régime*, not the opening blast of the new modern age that the French Revolution inaugurated.

Erin said that socialism is not opposed to liberalism, but actually there is a sharp line between socialism and liberalism, though not between socialism and democracy. Socialists did not conceive of democracy in terms of a checklist of individual rights: freedom of speech, freedom to vote, rule of law, etc. Democracy means popular sovereignty which was briefly enunciated in abstract ways in the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble but really was belied by subsequent American developments.

In 1862 Marx expressed the hope that the constitutional stage of the Civil War was over and that America was now entering a revolutionary stage. Marx looked forward to the overthrow of the Constitution.

The Rage Against the War Machine Rally is one of the most foolish events in recent history, in which certain Leftists paraded critics of the war in Ukraine and a speakers list dominated by fascists and semi-fascists, essentially putting the best face possible on these neo-Nazis, militias, and Second Amendment fans. This was a complete travesty. The chief threat of Bonapartism doesn't come from the ACLU or Anthony Fauci; it comes from Donald Trump.

CM: Bonapartism is a process. One faction of the ruling class tries to seize control of the state and utilizes the state to stabilize the economy and hold off the effects of the capitalist crisis. The working class can enter politics through figures of the ruling class. Every Marxist revolution has begun as a struggle within the ruling class between various Bonapartist contending factions. That fight opens the door to the working class asserting its own interests. Fascism is one form of Bonapartism, but there is also progressive Bonapartism like Roosevelt or Louis Bonaparte.

Allan Ramsay, "Coronation Portrait of King George III" (1762) [detail]

EH: Dan, how do you deal with the fact that Marx does speak explicitly about the question of the democratic republic? The Confederacy is aligning itself not only against the free proletariat but also against the legacy of the American Revolution itself. Marx also says that the American Revolution is the first statement of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Certainly, Jefferson saw himself as an ally of the French Revolution and someone who is part and parcel of the same historical trajectory.

DL: I doubt Marx ever read the U.S. Constitution. When he talks about democracy what I think he means is the absence of an aristocracy, a political-legal leveling where everyone is a citizen on the same legal basis. Marx would describe America pre-1861 as a democracy. He would hail the election of Lincoln as the fulfillment of this democracy and would certainly hope that the constitutional struggle would go on to become a revolutionary struggle and re-found the American Republic on a radically new basis.

In the U.S., the planters and the frontiersmen were pro-Jacobin whereas the landed gentry in Europe were horrified by Jacobinism. It was the urban tradesmen, small businessmen, rising manufacturers, and financiers in Europe who were most pro-Jacobin. The same elements in the U.S. supported the Federalists and were pro-British and hostile to France. It's a comedy of errors in which the alignment of the Americans is diametrically opposed to that of Europe. Jefferson is racist and truly anti-urban, anti-industrial, and pro-slavery, and yet he is fervently in favor of the radical wing of the French Revolution.

EH: Doesn't Jefferson try to ban slavery?

DL: He introduced certain anti-slavery legislation in Virginia, but he abandoned that. He and Madison were in the pro-slavery Democratic Party. Jefferson did give vent to certain seemingly radical statements, but he was, in all respects, a profoundly conservative figure, and yet pro-Jacobin. Hamilton, who was hostile to the Jacobins and pro-British, was anti-slavery, an industrialist, an urbanizer, and he was against states' rights. It's R. R. Palmer's thesis that Hamilton was an unconscious Jacobin and that Jefferson was much closer to the conservative opposition.

CM: Earl Browder champions Jefferson and portrays Hamilton as the counterrevolutionary, but I think Hamilton and others represent a more progressive wing of the American Revolution.

Portrait of Justice Earl Warren

Q&A

The Constitution also means the whole body of British common law, all of the court decisions, all of the laws, etc. Vernon Parrington said that the discovery that the Constitution in the narrowest sense is a conservative document was the great discovery of the progressive era. Charles Beard's An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution *(1913) demonstrated the extent to which the Constitution was the creation of debt owners, commercial classes, and planters. However, when I think about the history of the American Left, which is in many ways glorious, and the achievements of the American people, it was all accomplished in and through modifying the Constitution. When they created the Constitution, it was opposed by the democratic forces, which were the state legislatures and the anti-federalists. The Constitution was only ratified through the adoption of the Bill of Rights. Of course, the Second Amendment is a problem and states' rights are problems, but the Bill of Rights is fantastic. Why are we able to have this meeting right now? Because the anti-federalists modified the Constitution. The abolition of slavery was done under the Constitution. When Britain abolished slavery it recompensed the slave owners. We didn't do that. If we could expropriate slaves we could expropriate capital under the Constitution. We passed the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. I was in the Freedom Summer.[7] We sought to force the federal government to uphold the 14th Amendment in Mississippi. Roosevelt's enemy was not the Constitution. Roosevelt's enemy was the Supreme Court — and only for a couple of years until he created the Warren Court. The constitutional achievements of the New Deal are not just that we can regulate business, which they had argued under the Constitution; it was a constitutional revolution. Business regulation, criminal rights, desegregation, and voting rights were all part of the achievements of the Warren Court, and of the New Deal. The abolition of slavery during the Civil War, the New Deal revolution which extends into the 1960s, and the Warren Court are three moments in which our Constitution was modified in a positive direction. The Constitution is the enemy of populism. It's not the enemy of socialism.*

DL: Beard's interpretation of the Constitution was populist in the worst sense of the word. It was not a con by rich people to trick the little people. The Constitution was a significant democratic advance in that it opened up, for the first time, a democratic theater encompassing the entire country. That strengthened the anti-slavery forces because it meant that the South couldn't carry on on its own, in its separate territory. The anti-federalists were not in any way progressive; they were the states' rightists of their day. Many of them were pro-slavery, especially in the South. The three Civil War amendments were paradoxes that were adopted unconstitutionally by stretching Article 5 beyond recognition. Tennessee was forced to approve the 14th Amendment literally at gunpoint. They were extra-constitutional. The Warren Court, of course, was a quasi-revolutionary force. We are now seeing the unwinding of that process with the repeal of Roe v. Wade. The court is now reverting to its traditional role as a bulwark of conservatism and anti-democracy.

Are bribery and corruption undermining our constitutional rights?

DL: When we talk about constitutional rights, what rights are we talking about? The right to shoot your neighbor's family because he objects to you shooting off your AR-15 in the middle of the night? Is the Second Amendment a constitutional right that we should defend? We should be talking about democratic rights.

EH: I wonder what you would think of somebody like Rosa Luxemburg, who thought that the proletariat needs to arm themselves. The Second Amendment is about the right to organize oneself for revolutionary action and also to defend oneself. The Second Amendment doesn't give anyone the right to just shoot anybody with impunity.

DL: An individual right to bear arms is the opposite of a worker's militia. The arms are held by the working class in common, not individually. To impose a monopoly on violence, a worker's militia must and will disarm the American population, concentrating all weapons in the collective ownership of the working class.

EH: But the American population has to have weapons for them to be disarmed by the proletariat. If they're disarmed by the capitalist state then what are we talking about?

DL: The Second Amendment is the opposite of a worker's militia as conceived by Luxemburg or Trotsky.

CM: In the 1930s, fascist groups were shooting down workers on the picket line. Do we call the government to protect the striking workers or do we form our own workers' militia? In the 1960s, black people were defending themselves against the police. Do we call for gun control or do we allow people to defend themselves? It is quite an illusion that the capitalist state is going to keep everyone safe. Gun ownership is not racist and defending the Second Amendment is not the equivalent of defending hate crimes.

Steve Schapiro, photo of Freedom Summer volunteers arriving for training in Oxford, Ohio (June 14, 1964)

DL: No modern democratic constituent assembly would recreate the horror of a right to bear arms which is causing a catastrophe in our society and is the rallying cry of the far-Right militias. Weapons would only be owned with the express permission and under the conditions of the democratic state.

EH: Isn't the elephant in the room that today this means the capitalist state would regulate gun ownership?

DL: The capitalist state is not going to do that because it is dominated by Right-wing elements who essentially see the Second Amendment as every bit as important as the First Amendment.

What is the significance of the Popular Front?

DL: The Popular Front was an alliance of communists and liberals in support of Roosevelt in an attempt to forge a broad alliance of liberalism against fascism. Trotsky was in favor of a worker's front where the working class opposes liberalism and fascism. The collapse of liberalism laid the basis for fascism. The workers must put forward a program of revolutionary socialism and revolutionary democracy, a constituent assembly elected by one-person-one-vote on the basis of a proportional representation. The constituent assembly can say, "from now on you will hold your fork in your left hand rather than your right hand." It has unchecked power. The bourgeoisie want to see popular power broken up and pitted against each other through checks and balances.

CM: The Popular Front was the period in history when Marxism and communism had the greatest influence. It was an alliance with the Roosevelt coalition and progressive forces. Roosevelt was all about growth. The progressive movement today thinks that growth is bad. The Popular Front told white workers that racism hurt them, while today "anti-racists" tell white people that racism helps them. Aligning with Roosevelt was not the equivalent of aligning with Joe Biden. Aligning with Roosevelt would be the equivalent of aligning with Trump or a figure who's vehemently fighting against the majority of his own class.

Bernie Sanders!

CM: Yes!

Is the Constitution fundamentally racist?

CM: The Constitution is a tactical question. Historically, states' rights have been used for racism, so I wouldn't support it today. However, before the U.S. Civil War, one could support states' rights to nullify the fugitive slave laws. That's what's important about being a Marxist: there's no sacred eternality to these questions. We view it from a class and anti-imperialist perspective according to context.

DL: Yes, the Constitution was racist. First of all, America was racist. Black people, with few exceptions, could not vote. The Constitution wound up strengthening slavery. It rendered it legally impregnable. We needed the extra-constitutional Civil War to do away with slavery. The irony is that the Constitution also strengthened anti-slavery forces, but the Constitution was riddled with deep racism.

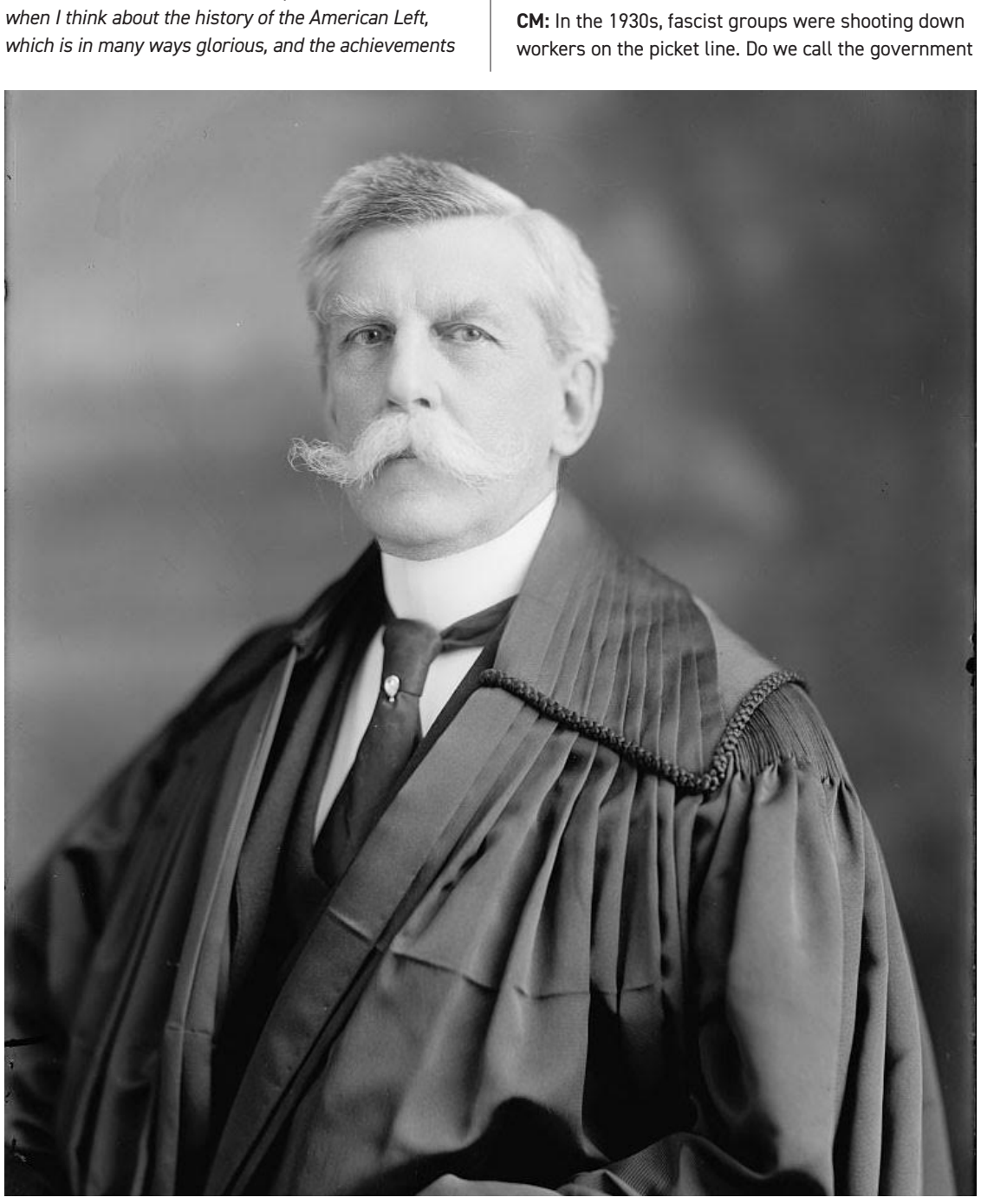
We need to develop a theory of the American republic and that means developing a theory of the structure of the Constitution of that republic. That means understanding the relationship between law and society. Is law under society? Is law over society? Is the rule of law desirable in itself or is the law an instrument of the revolutionary dictatorship? What does democracy mean?

EH: Dan raised popular sovereignty, and we need to address it. It's the Ninth Amendment to the Constitution: power to the people. What is meant by popular sovereignty? Is it simply the masses of people? What is the relationship between those people and the state? Marx writes about this in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): In 1789, and later with the ascension of Napoleon I, the revolutionary people were led first by a democratic republic then Napoleon I. Under Louis Bonaparte the people are no longer revolutionary and so the demand for democracy, which once seemed to be a tool against the old feudal order, becomes an instrument of repression, which is nevertheless demanded democratically.

In ancient civilizations, democracy meant the right to vote about whether you're going to stone somebody for cheating on her husband. In modern society, we hope that the state will not determine our social life. That is the vision of the bourgeois revolutions as reflected in the Constitution, which sought to protect that revolutionary society against an oppressive state. In the crisis of society, why is the demand for democracy posed? If you were living in 18th-century America, you didn't necessarily need to vote. That is, your ability to determine your life was not tied to the state. When the interests of society no longer seem to be universal, what is the recourse one has? Politics and the demand for democracy. Marxism sought to clarify the meaning of that demand, and the party for socialism sought to mediate the relationship between the self-organization of people in society, their demands on the state, and the state itself. In the absence of the party, we have a severe confusion about the relationship between society and the state, or what society even is.

We've left ourselves in the realm of progressive politics to have a discussion of how the progressive state should or shouldn't manage social life under capitalism. As long as that is the narrow straightjacket in which we conceive of the question of socialist politics, it's going to be difficult to understand what historical Marxism was, or to even ask questions about what revolution might be. In a poem, Robert Frost looked at this whole history and said, maybe we're going to be befuddled by Jefferson for another thousand years because the bourgeois revolution isn't a system of ideas, it's not a logic of a constitution, it's a historical process.[8] Marxism sought to relate to that historical process critically. **|P**

Transcribed by Oliver Chasan



Portrait of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

[1] See, e.g., Daniel Lazare, "Ditch the constitution," *Weekly Worker* 1489 (May 2, 2024), <https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1489/ditch-the-constitution/>.

[2] Available online at <https://youtu.be/Gf3ciW2ih8c>.

[3] Karl Marx, "Address of the International Working Men's Association to Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America" (November 29, 1864), *The Bee-Hive* 169 (January 7, 1865), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/iwma/documents/1864/lincoln-letter.htm>.

[4] Woodrow Wilson, "Notes for Lectures," in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 7, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 121: "The functions of government are in a very real sense independent of legislation, and even constitutions, because [they are] as old as government and inherent in its very nature. The bulk and complex minuteness of our positive law, which covers almost every case that can arise in Administration, obscures for us the fact that Administration cannot wait upon legislation, but must be given leave, or take it, to proceed without specific warrant in giving effect to the characteristic life of the State."

[5] Woodrow Wilson, "What is Progress?," in *The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913).

[6] Justice Holmes's dissent in *Abrams v. United States*, 250 U.S. 616 (1919). This case concerns two supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution who were sentenced to 20 years in prison for distributing pamphlets criticizing the American government's support of the Whites in Russia and calling for international proletarian revolution. Justice Holmes's dissenting opinion in *Abrams v. United States* in some ways reversed, or at least questioned, his earlier opinion in *Schenck v. United States* upholding the prosecution of Charles Schenck for sending leaflets through the mail critical of World War I. The *Schenck* opinion established the "clear and present danger test" as an exception to First Amendment rights in cases where the speech was a "clear and present danger" to national security and was the basis for upholding the prosecution of socialists, including most famously Eugene Debs, under the 1917 Espionage Act for criticism of World War I.

[7] Freedom Summer, also known as Mississippi Freedom Summer, was an American civil rights campaign in June 1964 to register as many black voters as possible in the state of Mississippi.

[8] Robert Frost, "The Black Cottage," in *North of Boston* (London: David Nutt, 1914).

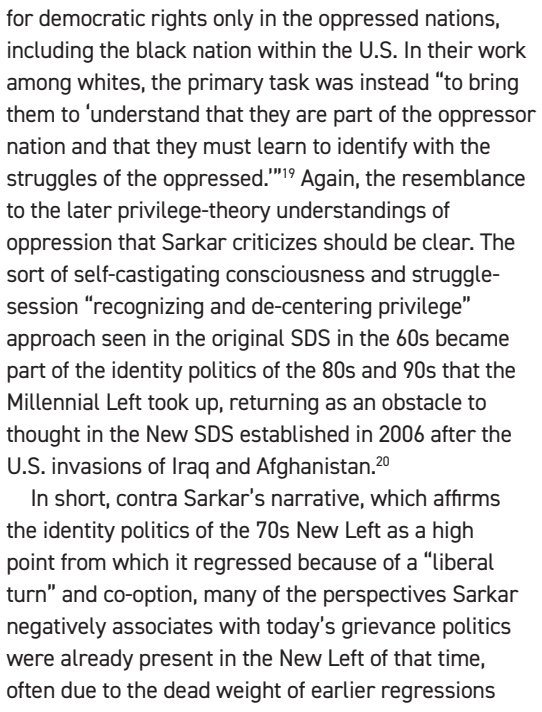
of a distinct social experience and corresponding set of virtues that need to be represented and embraced.

Maoism retained the Stalinist practice of the Popular Front, coupling it with a form of anti-colonial internationalism. Significantly, Maoism also developed methods of "consciousness-raising" that the New Left adopted in the late 1960s and 70s. Many New Leftists at the time were inspired by Mao's Cultural Revolution of 1966–76, which ostensibly aimed to purge the Chinese government and Chinese society of infiltrating bourgeois elements that were seeking to restore capitalism. Vital to the "struggle sessions" of the Cultural Revolution, where alleged class enemies were publicly denounced, humiliated, and beaten, was the practice of "speaking bitterness." Developed during the final years of the Chinese Revolution of 1927–49, this was the practice of encouraging peasants to confess the great injustices they had experienced and presenting the Party as their only means for retribution. Whatever might be said about this approach in its original context, the New Left adopted it in the absence of any mass party. This led to a kind of internalized, self-castigating consciousness among activists. Within organizations like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), this consciousness manifested in a Maoist struggle session-style approach of "recognizing and de-centering racial/gender privilege."

In the 1960s and 70s, these problems became especially noticeable in connection to the Third Worldist variant of Maoism.[12] This took as its point of departure the understanding that the "primary contradiction" was that between the colonial First World and the colonized or decolonizing Third World, and that the class struggle within Third World nations should therefore be subordinated to the anti-colonial struggle.[13] Many on the New Left gravitated towards this outlook as part of their broader disillusionment in the metropolitan working class, which turned them towards the national liberation movements against colonial rule and the new nation states established in their wake.[14] This process involved rediscovering the 30s Stalinist "Black Belt" thesis that black people in the black-majority parts of the Southern U.S. constituted "a nation within a nation" and that Communists should therefore advocate national self-determination for them. Many black radicals came to view China as offering "a 'colored,' or Third World, Marxist model that enabled them to challenge a white and Western vision of class struggle."[15] Early Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver "stressed the 'community imperialism' imposed on the ghettoes," with the Party financing its gun purchases in part from sales of Mao's infamous Little Red Book and running "full-page quotations from Chairman Mao and encomia to China in their newspaper."[16]

On the New Left, ideas about the struggle for black national self-determination in the U.S. as the domestic front of the anti-colonial struggle found mutual reinforcement with the notion that workers in the First World constituted a labor aristocracy who benefitted from the exploitation of oppressed people in the Third World.[17] This gave rise to the view that "white-skin privilege" was the domestic manifestation of the primary contradiction between oppressor and oppressed nation. The white-skin privilege theory of racism often led to the conclusion that, as white people enjoy privileges at the expense of black people and racism serves white people as a whole by defending and maintaining these privileges, "whites are necessarily conservative until and unless they are willing to give up the privileges they have obtained, since these privileges are enjoyed at the expense of the oppression of others."[18] In accordance with the white-skin-privilege approach, Maoist currents involved in SDS in the mid- to late-60s advocated struggle for democratic rights only in the oppressed nations, including the black nation within the U.S. In their work among whites, the primary task was instead "to bring them to 'understand that they are part of the oppressor nation and that they must learn to identify with the struggles of the oppressed.'"[19] Again, the resemblance to the later privilege-theory understandings of oppression that Sarkar criticizes should be clear. The sort of self-castigating consciousness and struggle-session "recognizing and de-centering privilege" approach seen in the original SDS in the 60s became part of the identity politics of the 80s and 90s that the Millennial Left took up, returning as an obstacle to thought in the New SDS established in 2006 after the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.[20]

In short, contra Sarkar's narrative, which affirms the identity politics of the 70s New Left as a high point from which it regressed because of a "liberal turn" and co-option, many of the perspectives Sarkar negatively associates with today's grievance politics were already present in the New Left of that time, often due to the dead weight of earlier regressions bearing down on the New Left as it confronted the problems of its own moment. At one point, Sarkar cites as a positive example of solidarity a moment at the 1968 Hemispheric Conference to Defeat American Imperialism when the North Vietnamese Minister of Culture Hoàng Minh Giám announced to a leading Panther, "You are Black Panthers, we are Yellow Panthers!" (43). In doing so, she elides how the Stalinist-Maoist politics of anti-imperialism of the time led many New Leftists to see white workers in the U.S. struggling against their own country's government as essentially fifth columnists for the anti-colonial revolution in the Third World rather than as part of a shared proletarian struggle for self-emancipation. And despite highlighting a gesture of solidarity from a North Vietnamese apparatchik to a black nationalist militant, Sarkar does not seem to recognize the role of such events in whitewashing Stalinist regimes and movements in the Third World, or to consider how such politics in even more degenerated form might have shaped present-day, "campist" forms of anti-imperialism, especially those that romanticize armed struggle.[21] Indeed, I would push the point about whitewashing one step further: the "anti-imperialism" that Sarkar praises was one of the primary means by which Stalinism ideologically sustained the lie that the World Revolution was still going on.



Eldridge Cleaver and members of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, "Eldridge Cleaver Discusses Revolution: An Interview from Exile," *The Black Panther* 3, no. 25 (October 11, 1969)

My point here is not simply to find the New Left wanting. However imperfectly, the New Left possessed some sense of its historical condition, marked by the sundering of theory from practice, and of its task of recovering that which history had liquidated. And compared to the generations of the Left that followed them, the New Left had genuinely broad horizons for social and political change. But if perfunctorily dismissing the New Left would be one error, another would be failing to think seriously about why the New Left was not able to find an adequate response to the problems of the post-20s and 30s Old Left, and why the New Left ultimately degenerated into resignation and abdication. That is what Sarkar's book fails to do. Indeed, it's quite striking that the main examples Sarkar reaches back to for contemporary guidance are from the post-68 New Left, that is, from a period when the New Left had already fractured and degraded.

Thus, Sarkar's book is symptomatic of the experience of the Millennial Left. It is not just that the book continues the broader Millennial Left trend of looking back to the New Left for answers while failing to learn from the New Left's mistakes. It is that, much like those New SDSers in the early years of the Millennial Left, Sarkar does not seem to even recognize many of the problems she identifies with the contemporary Left as problems of the New Left that have persisted into the 21st century.[22] By recognizing symptoms of the Left's regression only (or at least predominantly) from the 80s onwards — that is, only from the transition to neoliberalism onwards — Sarkar obscures the deeper history of these symptoms. Perhaps more to the point, she obscures how much of that later regression itself flowed from the New Left's own failure to constitute itself as a Left in the first place.

At this point, it's worth remarking on the broader framing of Sarkar's analysis: that of "minority elites" strategically maintaining their own power. This is something else Minority Rule has in common with previous books on the trajectory of identity politics since the 70s, perhaps most obviously Táíwò's *Elite Capture*.[23] Since Sarkar explicitly holds out the possibility of a society beyond elites, it would be unfair to treat her chosen conceptual language of "elite" versus "mass" as an imprint of the originally Right-wing elite theory that such terminology is associated with. After all, elite theory presumes that an elite is a permanent fixture for any political community.[24] Most probably, Sarkar has inherited a certain bourgeois-radical conception of a parasite elite that needs to be done away with, doubtless shaped in part by the rhetoric of "the 99%" versus "the 1%" coined during the 2011 Occupy movement that was a formative experience for much of the Millennial Left. And, in the absence of a mass workers' movement and party for socialism, understanding society in terms of different elites replacing each other gains a certain empirical plausibility. Still, despite attempting to articulate a Marxist class perspective as her own and repeatedly emphasizing the need to rebuild class consciousness, Sarkar never seems to acknowledge that, despite a superficial similarity, divisions of society into elite and mass do not correspond to class in a Marxist sense. As D. L. Jacobs puts it, "That there is a Left today that uses the terms 'ruling elite' and 'ruling class' interchangeably means a regression below the horizon of class struggle."[25] And even if it's not intended to do so, emphasizing an "elite" often slides into or reinforces a conspiratorial view of capitalism as something imposed from above by a shadowy cabal of the powerful.[26]

In a curiously located set of passages, Sarkar cites the American and French Revolutions as examples of how, prior to the development of capitalism and the working class, "all great upheavals in the world had been driven by one section of the elite toppling another" (64). She proceeds to assert that "The French Revolution was about the city rich overthrowing the landed aristocracy, and the American War of Independence was more about keeping tasty colony revenues for themselves than any lofty Enlightenment ideals" (64). Sarkar frames this as an explanation of a previously quoted passage from *The Communist Manifesto*.[27] While one can see how, when read in isolation, the relevant passage might appear to say what Sarkar believes it to say, in reality, the understanding of the bourgeois revolutions that Sarkar asserts here and attributes to Marx and Engels is a product of Stalinist historiography, reframed in language redolent of elite theory.

Marx, Engels, and other important thinkers in pre-Stalinist Marxism instead saw the bourgeois revolutions in terms of the rise of bourgeois social relations and the emergence of what is sometimes termed "commercial society."[28] This does not only mean the ascent of an economic class of merchants; it means a more thoroughgoing transformation of society from the end of the Middle Ages as relations based on free labor (as opposed to the unfree labor of serfdom) emerged and became predominant: the coming into being of a society where social life was primarily mediated by the sale of labor and its products. Without an understanding of the bourgeois revolutions that grasps this long-term development of bourgeois social relations that culminated in the armed, revolutionary conflicts themselves, one misses not only how feudal social relations came into crisis in the first place, but also how there even came to be a *political* conflict between those who saw untapped potentials for freedom within society that needed to be developed and those who opposed this. It also obscures what Marxism inherited from the bourgeois-revolutionary tradition, as well as the nature of capitalism itself as the self-contradiction of bourgeois society, that is, as the contradiction of bourgeois social relations and industrial forces of production.[29]

To be clear, I'm not accusing Sarkar of being a closet Stalinist. However, these uninterrogated assumptions in Sarkar's understanding of society and history do point to a certain repetition of symptoms on the Left. Importantly, these symptoms are traceable to the Popular Front via the New Left. This is because the work of historians in and around the Communist Parties in the 1940s–50s that cemented the Stalinist understanding of the bourgeois revolutions became integrated into a progressive historiography coming out of, among other things, the New Deal: a historiographical Popular Front, if you will.[30] In an ironic twist given the New Left's emergence as a challenge to the New Deal coalition, in the 60s, New Leftists picked up elements of this Stalinist-progressive approach to history, stressing the importance of categories like white supremacy and patriarchy as they turned towards recovering historically marginalized people in an increasingly sentimental, moralistic, and affirmative manner.[31] In other words, Sarkar again does not seem to notice how her own attempt at a critical account of the Left's regression into contemporary identity politics is itself encumbered by many of the same errors and blind-spots inherited from the New Left and Old Left that enabled contemporary identity politics.

Of course, a skeptical reader might accept that Sarkar's analysis of the Millennial Left's symptoms is deeply flawed and unoriginal and that this analysis is itself symptomatic of several major problems that the Millennial Left received from the New Left, but still find Sarkar's aim valuable. After all, isn't Sarkar's intention to help build a healthier Left that can take up material, working-class concerns like housing on the one hand, and identity-group concerns like trans rights on the other, in a way that reveals their interconnections beyond the level of the individual and unites the vast majority of people in contemporary capitalist society against their common exploiters and oppressors? And didn't Lenin famously remark that it is important to be a "tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of people it affects"?[32] Certainly many readers who share my frustrations with Sarkar's account would also share her exasperations with the politics of grievance and victimhood. Nevertheless, the commonsensical appeal of Sarkar's basic message that the Left needs to build large coalitions of diverse groups can easily occlude the vital matter of how one thinks and goes about this. There remains Lenin's "who-whom" question: who is the subject and who is the object of political action?

This is why I have emphasized the numerous points in Sarkar's analysis where the specter of the Popular Front lurks in the background. Many socialists and communists who participated in the Popular Front sincerely believed that they were advancing the cause of socialism. In reality, they were advancing the self-liquidation of Marxism and independent, socialist, working-class action: a self-liquidation from which the Left has never recovered. Instead of the ostensibly socialist and proletarian Left using the petty-bourgeois democrats, the petty-bourgeois democrats have time and again used — and ruthlessly disposed of — the ostensibly socialist and proletarian Left. Time and again, this has meant lowering the Left's political horizons to merely better managing capitalism and its discontents. At the time of writing this review, "Left" social media is jubilantly greeting Democratic Socialists of America member Zohran Mamdani's victory in the Democratic primary for the New York mayoral election — the lessons of the Millennial Left's failures memory-holed to further the conflation of socialism with progressivism and the liquidation of the would-be Left into the Democrats. Tellingly the would-be Left is doing this in terms that strongly echo what Sarkar advocates, lauding Mamdani for forming a coalition that speaks to the concerns of the working class and of women and minorities.

To avoid the same self-liquidation, any future attempt to reconstitute the Left would need an honest reckoning with how the regressions of both the Old Left and the New Left brought us to our current moment and continue to ideologically encumber the would-be Left in the forms of both identity politics and welfare statism. While Sarkar's book might provide interesting examples of these ideological encumbrances for a critical reader to dissect, ultimately her analysis is too weighed down by those same encumbrances to provide that needed reckoning. |P

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[1] See, e.g., Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Mass Movements and Racial Ideology* (London: Verso, 2022 [2018]); Touré F. Reed, *Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism* (London: Verso, 2020); Nancy Leong, *Identity Capitalists: The Powerful Insiders Who Exploit Diversity to Maintain Inequality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021); Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022). For a review of the latter three of these books, see Ridhiman Balaji, "Identity politics in America: A review-essay," *Platypus Review* 166 (May 2024), <https://platypus1917.org/2024/05/01/identity-politics-in-america-a-review-essay/>.

[2] I didn't like it.

[3] Chris Cutrone, "The Millennial Left is dead," *Platypus Review* 100 (October 2017), <https://platypus1917.org/2017/10/01/millennial-left-dead>.

[4] "Combahee River Collective Statement" (April 1977), <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/combahee-river-collective-statement/>.

[5] Mike Macnair, "Intersectionalism, the highest stage of western Stalinism?", *Critique* 46, no. 4 (December 2018): 546.

[6] Ibid., 546–48.

[7] This contrasts with the older Third International policy of the United Front, which sought to bring together the forces of the Left and the labor movement in particular and to win leadership over the mass working-class base of the reformist parties.

[8] Macnair, "Intersectionalism," 551.

[9] Pamela C. Nogales C., "The cancel wars: The legacy of the cultural turn in the age of Trump," *Platypus Review* 131 (November 2020), <https://platypus1917.org/2020/11/01/the-cancel-wars-the-legacy-of-the-cultural-turn-in-the-age-of-trump>.

[10] Ibid.

[11] For reasons of space and focus, I can't explore this point in detail here, but one important bridge between Popular Frontism in the 30s and identity politics in the 21st century would be Eurocommunism in the 1970s and 80s, which advocated a cross-class Popular Alliance rooted in the New Social Movements.

[12] One can trace Third Worldism in general to the 1929 Sixth Congress of the Third International, which prioritized the struggle for national liberation and against imperialism over the struggle between classes, neatly dividing the world into countries where the immediate aim was working-class rule and countries where it instead was the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry."

[13] Mao's essays that are popular points of reference among New Left Third Worldists include "On Contradiction" (1937), "The Role of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War" (1938), and "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People" (1957).

[14] Ian Birchall, "The Third World and After," *New Left Review* 80 (Mar/Apr 2013): 151–60.

[15] Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, "Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 1, no. 4 (1999): 8.

[16] David Friedman, "The Roots of Repression," *Independent Socialist* 13 (October 1969): 10, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workerspower/is13.pdf>; Tom Milstein, "A Perspective on the Panthers," *Commentary* (September 1970).

[17] An important intellectual resource for this notion was the "dependency theory" outlined by scholars associated with the *Monthly Review* magazine and publishing house in the 1950s–70s, such as Paul A. Baran, Paul Sweezy, Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank, and Immanuel Wallerstein. Dependency theory claims that underdeveloped countries on the "periphery" have to sell resources like raw materials to advanced countries in the "core," who then transform them into finished goods, leaving the underdeveloped countries to purchase them at high prices, thereby depleting the capital they might otherwise have devoted to developing their own productive capacity.

[18] See Jack Weinberg and Jack Gerson, "SDS and the Movement: Where Do We Go from Here?," and Jesse Lemisch, "'If You Gotta Ask, Man, You'll Never Know,'" *Independent Socialist* 12 (September 1969): 3–10, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workerspower/is12.pdf>.

[19] Ibid.

[20] For more on the politics of SDS and wider student activism in the U.S. in this period, see Pamela C. Nogales C., Carlos J. Pereira Di Salvo, and Laurie Rojas, "Politics of the contemporary student Left," *Platypus Review* 15 (September 2009), <https://platypus1917.org/2009/09/30/politics-of-the-contemporary-student-left/>.

[21] For an astute analysis of this, see Moishe Postone, "History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism," *Public Culture* 19, no.1 (2006): 93–110.

[22] For more on the New SDS's failure to recognize the persistence of the New Left's problems, see Laurie Rojas, "The culture wars in the age of Trump," *Platypus Review* 131 (November 2020), <https://platypus1917.org/2020/11/01/the-culture-wars-in-the-age-of-trump/>.

[23] See Balaji, "Identity politics in America."

[24] This is perhaps most apparent in the Italian elite theorist Vilfredo Pareto's concept of the "circulation of elites." Pareto introduced this in his *Trattato di Sociologia Generale* (1916), published in English as *The Mind and Society* (1935).

[25] D. L. Jacobs, "On Parvini's *The Populist Delusion*," *Sublation* (July 16, 2025), <https://www.sublationmag.com/post/on-parvini-s-the-populist-delusion>.

[26] This is perhaps most obvious in antisemitic understandings of capitalism.

[27] The passage in question is from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Bourgeois and Proletarians," in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>: "All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority."

[28] For a thorough explanation of this and other points I summarize in this paragraph, see James M. Vaughn, "1776 in world history: The American Revolution as bourgeois revolution," *Platypus Review* 62 (December 2013 – January 2014), <https://platypus1917.org/2013/12/15/1776-in-world-history/>.

[29] Chris Cutrone, "Capital and labor," *Platypus Review* 126 (May 2020), <https://platypus1917.org/2020/05/01/capital-and-labor/>.

[30] I have in mind works like Christopher Hill's *The English Revolution*, 1640 (1940) and Georges Lefebvre's *The Coming of the French Revolution* (1939) that put forward the view of a city-based merchant class developing in the womb of feudal society who came to experience the feudal mode of production as a fetter on its aspirations and profitability, leading it to break through this fetter by launching a political revolution. I thank James Vaughn for the phrase "historiographical Popular Front."

[31] For an account of aspects of this development in the context of labor history, including how the New Left English historian E. P. Thompson inspired Left-wing histories to put forward what the Hungarian Marxist philosopher G. M. Tamás called an "angelic view of the exploited," see Will Stratford, "Labor history and the Left," *Platypus Review* 149 (September 2022), <https://platypus1917.org/2022/09/01/labor-history-and-the-left/>.

[32] V. I. Lenin, "Trade-Unionist Politics And Social-Democratic Politics," in *What is to be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (1902), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>.